



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University Review

Volume 9

Issue 2 *The Greeks Institute*

Article 7

Spring 1989

The Greek Achievement: The Birth of Classicism

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Recommended Citation

Di Lisio, Roch-Josef (1989) "The Greek Achievement: The Birth of Classicism," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol9/iss2/7>

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The Greek Achievement: The Birth of Classicism

Cover Page Footnote

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the The Greeks Institute, a series of lectures presented to secondary school teachers in the Bridgeport Public Schools during the spring of 1989. Co-sponsored by the Connecticut Humanities Council, Sacred Heart University, and the Bridgeport Public Schools, the purpose of the institute has been to provide teachers with an interdisciplinary exploration of classical Greece for the purposes of professional enrichment and curriculum development.

ROCH-JOSEF di LISIO

The Greek Achievement: The Birth of Classicism

I. The Classical Form: A Sculptural Achievement

The contemplation of the physical universe and the vicissitudes of the human condition as an extension of both physical and metaphysical reality produced in the Greek mind of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. the definitive realization of the inherent laws, the rules, that govern the nature of form. This realization and enunciation of physical, mathematical, and philosophic principles is the very essence of the classical form. The exactitude of philosophic reasoning and the precision of mathematics, both of which embody the nature of proportion, coupled with the divine gift (divine because indefinable) of the aesthetic experience constitute the Classical form of the Greek art and architecture of that supreme moment in the history of the Greek achievement, the fifth century B.C. Exactitude, precision, proportion, and aestheticism are key concepts, key words in the understanding of the principle of classicism. All imply the ultimate, the definitive expression, the unflinching attitude of the mind and the emotions.

It is the exactness and the precision of proportion coupled with the supreme sense and experience of beauty which is the embodiment of the classical form of Greek monumental sculpture. Monumental glyptic (carved) sculpture must be distinguished from the plastic (modeled) and even pictorial (fluid) representation.¹ Stone and the sculptor's hammer and chisel are a duelling combination. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, the sculptor must battle with the stone, driven by an unrelenting passion to extract the perfect form — the ultimate fulfillment — from the uncompromising matter. The bite of the chisel, the vulnerability of the stone: both are definitive forces. The sculptor can correct (manipulate) only by *removing* substance from the amorphous mass. The introduction and accomplishment of exact proportion in monumental sculpture is born of the control, the gift of artistic technique, and aesthetic emotion, the gift of the experience and love of beauty, of the sculptor.

The driving passion of the Greek sculptor of fifth century Athens was the necessity to give birth: to bring into being what the mind had

conceived as truth and perfection from the physical and mathematical principles inherent in the universe. At that moment in time — after the meticulous and rigid productions of the Geometric and Archaic periods and before the over-confident, luxurious softening and theatrical sweetness of the Hellenistic period — the truth of physical, mathematical, metaphysical, and aesthetic reality was captured and brought forth in its most exact and pleasing form from the stone. The manifestation of the principle of classicism permeates all of the Greek achievement of the late sixth, the fifth, and the early fourth centuries: religion, poetry, the drama, philosophy, the arts, mathematics, politics, the sciences. In all there is the exactness and precision of the sculptural act, the bite of the chisel on the stone. That extraordinary combination of the proportional understanding of the physical universe in all its laws, of the essence of physical and metaphysical reality, and the recognition of ultimate perfection (the gift of the divine) is at the heart of the Greek achievement, a sculptural achievement: the classical form.

There is perhaps no better example of the classical achievement in the arts than the three orders of architecture: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. The Doric order was evolved in mainland Greece by 600 B.C. in its earliest and aesthetically simplest form reminiscent of New Kingdom Egyptian temples and Mycenaean *tholos* tombs and in a free adaptation of the details of earlier wooden buildings. The Ionic order was evolved in the Eastern Greek world (Asia Minor) and the Islands by 560 B.C. and represents influences from the Ancient Near East and that period of Greek art which is designated the Orientalizing phase. The last order to appear was the Corinthian in the late fifth century B.C., a variant of the Ionic order and little used by the Greeks themselves, though much loved by the Romans. These three innovative orders of architecture embody the Greek classical ideal of physical, mathematical, and logical proportion, dignified beauty, and monumental sculptural perfection.

That mode — that defining and shaping of man's life by the classical rule — is the very matrix of Western civilization, the warp and woof of the splendid tapestry of Western culture. That mode is in essence a sculptural achievement, a chiselling of proportion from the amorphous and difficult reality into which man is born.

II. Antecedents of the Classical Form: The Development of the Monumental Sculptured Figure

Greece gave birth to the classical form in all its aspects, and that form is materialized in the most overwhelming and purest sense in the classical monumental sculptured figure and architecture of the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C. That the perfection of form by the creative genius of the Greek mind described above did not take place in a particular moment of divine ecstasy or a sudden brilliant flash of inspiration or intuition is as obvious as the principle of cause and effect, the very basis of time and history itself. The beginnings of the great civilizations of the Ancient Near East and Egypt are removed from the Hellenic period of Greek history and from the golden age of classicism in the fifth century B.C. by more than two thousand years. The Greek mind, which is the prototype of Western thought and the inspiration of Western art and architecture, was itself influenced by the momentous achievements of the peoples of the Ancient Near East: the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Persians — the “cradle” of Western civilization — and that most extraordinary and fascinating civilization, Egypt. The religions, laws, legends, governments, and military might as well as the art and architecture of these brilliant peoples played a part in the formation of the Greek mind and the birth of classicism. Also, notwithstanding the intervening centuries of Homer’s “Dark Age,” those mighty achievements of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilization of Helladic Greece, that fabulous Aegean prologue to the Classical age, contributed their part to the genesis of the Greek miracle.

We need only glance at the highly accomplished monumental majestic sculpture of the ninth century palace of one of the great Assyrian kings, Ashurnasirpal II² or at some of the stone and clay statuary and relief sculpture of Mesopotamia from as far back as the third and fourth millennia B.C. to see what is undoubtedly the beginnings of a superior and highly representational art form. But above all, it is to the art and architecture of Ancient Egypt from as far back as the third and fourth Dynasties in the third millennium B.C. that we must turn for the most overwhelming evidence of the ancient influence that evolved in stages into the glories of the Greek classical sculptural form. In the history of man’s achievement in the quarrying and carving of stone the Egyptians emerge not only as the first but

perhaps the greatest when we consider the sheer size of their monuments and the primitive state of technology available to them, especially in the early dynastic periods. The remarkable accomplishment of the monumental sculptured figures of the Pharaohs and Queens of Egypt is a familiar sight in many of the world's museums and in countless books on the glories of the ancient land of the Nile. The rigidity of these figures and the apparent lifelessness of their features which we cannot help but remark upon is akin to the sculptured and modeled representations of the human and animal figures of the art forms prevalent throughout the pre-classical ancient world. This rudimentary rigidity and lack of spiritual form appears in the stone and clay statuettes, reliefs, and votive figurines of the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Minoans, in the gold masks, sculpture, and architecture of the Mycenaeans, and in the stone and terra-cotta statuary of the Etruscans. In the numerous wall paintings in brilliant colors from the tombs of the Egyptians and Etruscans and from the Minoan and Mycenaean palaces we are confronted again and again with the vacant stare and enigmatic smile, the rigid and contorted form, the rudimentary limbs and faces, whether in the dance or in battle, whether at work, in sport, or in ritual stance. Again, in the various bronze figures that have survived from pre-classical times, no matter how accomplished, no matter how moving, the form is lacking in that quintessential realistic quality: the emanation of life.

These forms, representational both of the human and the divine, are, in their rigid stylization, the embodiment of the religious condition, the beliefs of these early civilizations. The confrontations with reality, worldly and spiritual, which we encounter in these many varied representations have in common a sobriety, an awe and supplicant fear of a mysterious and harsh universe — a universe, however, not devoid of wonder, marvels, joys, and sympathy for its inhabitants. The rites and revels mankind performed for its gods and goddesses, good and evil spirits inherent in the earth and sky, trees, seasons, and elements, are depicted in clay and bronze, wall paintings and stone figures, in a trance-like posture of reverence and obedience, fear and submission. Even the figures of royal and semi-divine kings and queens are frozen in a preordained pride and bearing, rulers who are ruled by the universe of spirit.

Along the road to the ideal form and the living image of fifth century classicism, the Greek artist, influenced by the achievements

of these many ancient peoples, by their laws and their religions, their literature and science, by their art and architecture, left for posterity his own stages in his ascent towards perfection: the Geometric and Archaic images of gods, man, and beasts. Vases of various shapes and categories, clay and bronze figurines, jewelry and weapons show the same rudimentary skill and aspiration throughout the long and slightly varied Proto-Geometric and Geometric Periods of Greek art from about the twelfth to the eighth centuries B.C.

With the impetus of the art forms of the Ancient Near East and Egypt (with whom the Greeks had had commercial relations for many centuries), the rigid but more representational and recognizable form of the human figure began to appear and developed in the Archaic Period, from the end of the eighth century to about 480 B.C., into an admirable series of monumental freestanding sculptured figures. This impressive, very accomplished and highly sympathetic series of youthful male and female figures, *Kouroi* and *Korai*, are, within the yardstick of sculptural progress through the seventh and sixth centuries, the first realization of true monumental sculpture in Greek lands.³ The Archaic period progressed from the end of the eighth to the early fifth century B.C. The light of the Greek mind was growing brighter, the realization and pursuit of the ideal form was growing stronger. The Greek achievement was at hand and showed itself persuasively in the art of the late Archaic period. Inspired by the achievements of those great civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Egypt, Crete, and Mycenae, Greek genius came to its finest hour, reaching its ultimate fulfillment in the birth of the definitive Classical form in the fifth century B.C. For the Hellenic Greek mind the ideal form, whether in the arts, philosophy, the drama, poetry, mathematics — whatever the achievement — constituted the exact, the precise representation of reality: the truth of reality both seen and deduced. Through contemplation of the universe and man and with the gifted brilliance of the highest reasoning and deductive powers, the classical Greek mind formulated the spirit and principles of the laws and meaning of life and the universe. The exhaustive measuring thought of Plato and Aristotle — the search for, definition, and classification of the ideal and the real — is the quintessential method and substance of the Greek mind in its formulation and canonization of the rule, of the philosophical, the mathematical, the proportional exactness of reality.

Dealing with reality as the shapeless mass of living rock, the classical Greek mind, like the sculptor's chisel, driven by the need to understand, carved and brought order and form out of chaos and added that third and most glorious dimension to the classical monumental sculptured figure: the expression of life, the attribute of the living form. With the exact proportionment and classification of the parts, the Greeks gave to Western man the whole, precise and true to the real and the ideal form. This way of expressing reality is the essence of the classical form.

III. Classicism: The Enduring Western Form

The classical form in its many manifestations reached its fullest and purest expression in the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C. Political dissension and military excesses followed and weakened the primacy of Athens, the stronghold of classicism. Under the leadership of Philip II of Macedon and especially of his illustrious son Alexander the Great, Greece entered into her final phase of political importance, the Hellenistic period. The Greek art form of the Hellenistic period (323-30 B.C.) emerged from the Classical mold as a child from wise but stern parents. Subtle but observable changes occurred in the monumental sculptural figure. The serious perfection of the classical form under the influence of a time of bold military activity and political and geographical expansion, in a new Greek world born of might, power, and colonial ambition, began to soften, and its contemplative steadfast beauty became a more curvaceous, undulating sensuousness, a voluptuous sweetness that approaches the baroque form of an age yet to come. This new softened Hellenistic-Greek form spread to the far outreaches of the Alexandrine Empire, and it was these sybaritic figures as well as the supremely imposing beauty of their Golden Age ancestors that the Roman legions saw in their forays throughout the Greek world soon to be theirs.

It is to the Roman mind, that brilliant administrative, law-giving power founded on the antique wisdom of Greece and her antecedents, that we must turn for the most efficacious and far-reaching transmission of the classical form in all its aspects. The Roman Empire, the greatest the ancient world had known, bore throughout its many lands to new peoples far different from her own and those of her

classical forebears a new way of life, a new religion from that Levantine world of old now hers, and a new art form. The classical form of Roman sculpture and architecture is altogether inspired by the Greek fountainhead and continues the sweetness and light of the Hellenistic period. Throughout all of Rome's grand achievement runs that lust for living on a practical level, that joyous brutal revelry in sensual worldly delights coupled with an astounding brilliance in administrative organization, a chief factor in their imperial success, a profound respect for authority and the law which that respect engenders, and, notwithstanding that momentous Egyptian achievement of millenia past, an ingenious constructive ability far beyond what the world had known. These attributes of the Roman character, imbued with the Greek classical achievement in all its manifestations, flow throughout the span of Western culture. Nowhere are these characteristics more clear than in the art and architecture spread about the Roman world. The Greek classical orders of architecture were adopted and developed by the Romans and their political predecessors, those early pioneers of culture on the Peninsula, the Etruscans. Added to the three Greek orders, the Tuscan order, a variant of the Greek Doric order, was produced by the Etruscans at some time in the fifth or sixth centuries B.C. The Roman contribution was the Composite order, which did not differ greatly from the Corinthian of classical Greece and which, like it, was an offshoot from the Ionic.

Notwithstanding the cataclysm of the barbarian invasions, which, among other factors, brought about the end of Rome's political greatness, the Roman world with its classical spirit continued throughout the western Middle Ages. Though the classical forms became obscured by Gothic and Byzantine temperaments and beliefs, they remained a quintessential base, baptized and redeemed in the Christian faith, of the mediaeval world. In Italy, as early as the twelfth and by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, inspired by such minds as Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, steeped in the classical tradition, and by the new-world vision of St. Francis, the heavy shroud of piety of the mystical North and the Eastern Byzantine world began to fall away and revealed that worldly beauty of man and his universe which the Greeks had epitomized and the Romans had known and loved.

The spirit of the age of the Renaissance, that glittering overture

to our modern Western world, is permeated with the classical ideal. Once again, the classical form in its purest essence, reinforced, reinterpreted, and enriched as it had been before by the Romans, was embellished and given new and brilliant life full of rhythm and color in the prodigious achievements of some of the greatest minds in the history of Western culture. Throughout the old and new lands of the Western world, the Renaissance genius of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Palladio, Durer, Inigo Jones, and Lord Burlington, among the many gifted prodigies of that illustrious period in the history of the West, fell under the spell of the classical form. The predominance of the classical format is also everywhere evident in the artistic, literary, and scientific brilliance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

It is also evident in the baroque of the seventeenth century, and in the very rich and revolutionary eighteenth century with its new fervor in the mid-century neoclassical phase (typified in England by Robert Adam, Sir John Soane, and John Nash and in the United States by Thomas Jefferson), which gave us such edifying archaeological investigations and stimulating studies as James Stuart's and Nicholas Revett's *The Antiquities of Athens* in 1762 and Robert Wood's *Ruins of Palmyra* (1753) and *Ruins of Balbec* (1757). Discoveries at Herculaneum (1719) and Pompeii (1748) and other sites in Italy, Asia Minor, and Greece produced a growing respect for the monuments of classical antiquity. After the Revolutionary period, with the beginning of the new American Republic at the end of the eighteenth century, the architecture of the Federal capital and in the important centers showed a strong classical inspiration — at first from England under the influence of Robert Adam and, more importantly, from France, especially at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the classical theme was present in the many revivals that swept over the Western art form. In sculpture the works of Antoine Houdon (1744-1828), Antonio Canova (1757-1822), and the American, Horatio Greenough (1805-1852) show clearly the nostalgia for the classical posture. In architecture the classical theme dominates the scene in the capitals of Europe, and classicism chiefly gained the day in the "Empire" period of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1804-1814. Great feats of classicism such as the *Chambre des Deputes* (1807) by Poyet, Jacques Germain Soufflot's Pantheon (1792), and Pierre-

Alexandre Vignon's Church of the Madeleine (1806-1842) sum up the pride and conviction of Paris then and now. From about 1820 to about 1860 in the United States a style of architecture labeled Greek Revival predominated. In almost every American city and in outlying suburban and country towns examples of the Greek Revival phase in varying degrees of detail can be found. In painting and sculpture the neoclassical style of the mid and later eighteenth century flowed into the Romantic phase of the nineteenth century so much inspired by classical ruins and dreamy Arcadian landscapes as well as by Greek democratic ideals of individual liberty and freedom and classical-heroic themes.

At this point in time the Western world is trying to emerge artistically from the static modern-geometric form and skyscraper repetitiveness to a more human and less machine image by the introduction of symbols of the order and reason of the classical format: classical pediments, columns, and capitals. The post-modern architects have been formulating a new equation for the contemporary Western world: a hope of balance, of cooperation, an acknowledgement once again of man's past glories coupled with the belief in the modern achievement, a search for truth in the realities of man and the universe.

That the classical form has prevailed throughout the long course of Western civilization testifies to its deep-rooted appeal not only visually and emotionally but also to its philosophic and mathematical truth, precision, and brilliance: those pristine Greek qualities that permeate the very substance and spirit of the classical form in all its manifestations. The Greek achievement — the classical achievement — was and is the achievement of Western man and remains the quintessential achievement of Western culture.

Notes

¹On this distinction see Rhys Carpenter, *Greek Sculpture: A Critical Review* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), chapter 1.

²We are fortunate and privileged to have a splendid selection of this awesome relief and free-standing sculpture in the Gallery of Ancient and Near Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

³John Boardman discusses these figures in *Greek Sculpture: The Archaic Period* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 18 ff.